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Back to Futures

Diffractions and Becomings of Collaborative Writing

Ken Gale, Jonathan Wyatt

Abstract In making a contribution to this collection of writings, and in writing to and with them, this paper is not conceived, designed or presented as summative, conclusive or as a synthetical representation of the other writings in this edition. This paper appears at the end of the collection simply and only because of the proclivities and necessities of the linearity and organisational requirements of journal production. It is written and presented with the hope that it will diffract from the (im)possibilities of rigid classification and of creating a category of difference with which to capture or unitise collaborative writing. Further, this paper, in resisting closure and conclusion, also wishes to write with and for becoming collaborative writing, sensing the opportunities, the potential and the creative anticipations that writing collaboratively always seems to afford. Any sense gained from reading the paper that it offers celebratory hints, suggestions of gratitude and an indication of pleasure gained in sharing the esteemed company of friends and colleagues is entirely intentional.

Keywords: *collaborative writing, materiality, Deleuze, assemblage, autoethnography*

We include this writing as a final contribution to the collection and offer it as a beginning. With Deleuze, it is a starting in the middle; a thinking, feeling and sensing into futures, a writing into an always not yet known ... and then, of course, always something more.

"We." That word we begin with and are unable to find ourselves not using (see St. Pierre, 2011). That 'node' (Hilton, 2011). Presented to the reader as if unproblematic and uncontroversial. The familiar voice of collaboratively written scholarship. This 'we' of our opening paragraph has been theoretically and politically troubled by this issue's contributors, who take issue with its seamless anonymity and elaborate upon

its assemblage. The 'we' of the opening paragraph emerged as Ken wrote at home in Cornwall, typing those words you have just read, and sending them to Jonathan, who inserted these italicised words here and made suggestions to 'Ken's' first paragraph.

We allow our individuating voices to leak on to the page in this and the following italicised texts; allow our becomings Ken, becomings Jonathan, becomings Ken-Jonathan to be present in our stutterings as these words, which we struggle with, come alive in their tentative form in what will be the (not) ending of this edition.



Having read, annotated, talked about, reviewed and lived with these rich contributions for nearly a year it seems timely to think of this work in the context of what St. Pierre refers to as "post qualitative research": we present this writing as both "critique and the coming after" (2011, p. 611). As we write into the space of conclusion, and in so doing engage in a taking care not to do this, we anticipate and hope to offer up a new space of inquiry, one of critique and of new, vibrant, energetic and energising collaborative work.

In tentatively summarising the complexity, heterogeneity and multiplicity of the kind of autoethnographic, performative, theoretical and collaborative work that is collected here we, as does Speedy in her opening article, use a comment employed by Massey, in a similar referential context, when she says, "All I mean at this point is the contemporaneous existence of a plurality of trajectories" (2005, p. 12). In talking about the "coexisting heterogeneities" that potentially inhere within such "simultaneity" she further argues that "(i)t is not the particular nature of heterogeneities but the fact of them that is intrinsic to space" (p. 12). And so, we would argue, in many respects what this special edition does, both in simple and highly complex ways, is to open up a space for future transgression, experimentation, critique and inquiry. Further, in appropriating a sentence from St. Pierre and using it in differentiation, "*But I could not have thought those thoughts by thinking alone*" (use of italics in the original, 2011, p. 621), we also wish to make a claim for the importance of the collaborative nature of the work that can be carried out in such a space. She goes on to say, of her own research, "That work about subjectivity (an inadequate concept) required a simultaneity of living, reading, and writing," (p. 621) and, in echoing these words, we also want to say that the thinking (and the living, and the reading and the writing) is also something that always goes on with others. And, we would argue, it goes on with others in and with a creativity of difference. We concur with Barad when she problematises "reflection as a pervasive trope for

knowing" (2007, p. 72), because it seems to us that this collection opens a space of productive and challenging diffraction rather than one in which reflexivity angles our lenses toward sameness or strategies of collusive uniformity. This collection of collaborative writings offers a challenge to "the larger audit and accountability culture that privileges an instrumental, engineering model of social science that feeds on metrics to establish 'what works'" (St. Pierre, 2011, p. 611). We claim that within these writings is to be found an assemblage of multiplicities, of divergent possibility, in which the presence of singularities offers lines of flight that can (inter)activate the various 'in-betweens' that many of the writers refer to here; and also, and perhaps more crucially, with Barad they can be seen as working as emergent, (intra)activating the "mutual constitution of entangled agencies" (2007, p. 33).

We would propose a reading of the contributions in terms of what they might signify as collaborative strategies of inquiry that could be taken and applied in social, cultural and political space. We would further encourage readings that recognise, acknowledge and activate the rhythms and harmonies, the fractures and fusions that are in play between the material constitution of bodies and the discursive practices that, through processes of signification, representation and identification, might be seen to bring them into play. Such an approach, which Barad names "ontoepistemological" (2007, p. 44), challenges the notion and its associated practices that there exists a relational space of correspondence between language and things and subverts this by drawing attention to the relationships that exist between the material and the discursive and how the material can be seen to matter. We see this as a mattering that is, at the very least, of ethical aesthetic and political import. As Pelias writes, with others, about writing collaboratively:

Yes, Larry, Jonathan, Ken, and Tami, it matters. It matters where we put our bodies and how they align. It matters that we share space, each in our own way, each finding comfort there, each believing it matters. "Mattering," as Ken writes, "is the very red blood of this space." Without such spaces, blood does not flow and when blood does not flow, we are nothing more than dried carcasses. So what else is there to do but to cherish the space that carries mattering. Such a way of being matters. (Gale et al., 2012a, p.166)

As we visit each of these writings again some questions serve to diffract us in concept, affect and percept. How do we see selves in these entanglements? How do we see these writings as they move to a positioning, an identification and an embodiment in these times of post qualitative research and neo-liberal excess and apocalypse?



Jane Speedy (as does Elyse Pineau), in her 'single-authored' contribution to the issue, points us towards a re-framing of all writing as collaborative. Jane brings to our attention: the presence/absence of the (dis)embodied, broken-bodied, writer; and the material, emancipatory, and ethical claims of collaborative writing. Indeed, as she writes, "all writing is an embodied and imagined accumulation of selves and stories." She brings together disciplinary traditions, which seem to us to not speak to each other enough, the theoretical/poststructural/educational and the performance/performative/autoethnographic—"within and across writers, across disciplines and themes and across continents." in the pursuit of building connections, of building "loving communities."

I find I can't find words to say in the first person plural about the joy of having Jane here in this issue, knowing that for months we both imagined in our individuating and collaborating ways she would not be able to write her paper, only to discover, only weeks from our submission deadline, that she would be here. I can't find the words in the "we" voice, so I will write here, to/with you to see what you make of it.



In offering a reconceptualisation and a reworking of their original and influential work on collective biography Bronwyn Davies and Susanne Gannon, in their paper, show us how, through the use of memory work and the processes and practices of collective biography, an actual re-membering of the body can be seen to take place. Through their use and explication, after Barad, of the "intra-active" practices of collective biography, through the facilitative erosion of representational clichés and through the regenerative practice of placing the constitution of the becoming of the body under erasure, they serve to demonstrate how discursive practices matter.

As I write these words of thought and consideration I have a powerful memory of working with Bronwyn in one of her collective biography workshops, always being encouraged to challenge the clichés that territorialise our memories in particular ways, always being eased into smooth space where new concept, affect and percept serve to trouble and dismantle the less than careful representation of a remembered heretofore.



In “Encountering Deleuze” the collaborative writers wrote in virtuality, creating actuality across different continents, embracing many different “plot(s) of... land” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988, p. 161): Georgia, Cornwall, France, England, Finland, Iceland. In the paper’s tentative early writings, perhaps through discursive imperialism, perhaps through encounters of hesitation and uncertainty, perhaps through convenience, in these becomings ‘English’ emerged as the dominant “majoritarian” language (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988). Slowly the paper, in its nascent, wavering, narrative and chronological linearity, works to disrupt the ascendancy of this dominant and dominating form and as various “minoritarian” tropes and performative nuances begin to sparkle and dance in the epistemic structures and foundational conventions of the traditional and customary forms, new shapes and phenomena become in their unfoldings:

This writing is not orderly but a blizzard, our words meeting each other loose and free, our skin softening as the imagined clear, sharp delineations between me/you/us fade.

What Barad describes as “the excessive power granted to language to determine what is real” (2007, p. 133) becomes destabilised, in the emerging intra-active writings of this paper, as bodies and body parts appear, touch, infect and irresistibly come to life in the various interstices and widening fissures of the paper’s increasingly transmutating linguistic forms.

Our rhythmic languages and exchanges viscerally move me, and flow so beautifully through/between/among the ever-changing space(s) within which we (re)write.

The “minor literatures” that make the continental drifts, desert islands and shifting terrain of this paper ever more populous not only engage in linguistic actions, they bring writing bodies into play in performative ways. These are ways that not only use language to narrate, expose and theorise but also to involve and engage the multiple material worlds of their becoming. The paper comes alive in its realisation, its making real, a “stuttering” that conflates the play of linguistic variation, with its hesitant phrases, its felting, altering patterns and its inventions of meanings with the material emergences of bodies actualising, dis/organising, dis/identifying bodies always transmutating in the touch with the writings they voice.

And as I bring these words together here, as I write with some contemplation, some attempt at temporary and spatial finality, I am aware of blizzards still blowing, of

*new writings arriving in my inbox, of flurries of crystal poetry dancing in the cran-
nies and crevices of our existent writings: a productive desire takes me to my writing
space, this piece of writing never seems to end!*



The coin has two sides; it can land one way or the other. Claudio Moreira and Marcelo Diversi employ and disrupt this binary in their collaborative writing practices. By writing together they undermine the politics of the academy, referring, as does Jane Speedy, to the technology of the academy disallowing collaboration: ‘full’ but ‘equal’ contributions are impossible, unthinkable. In the publications’ pecking order, for ‘together,’ read ‘less.’ There has to be (an) order, the academy declares. One author must precede—dominate—another; furthermore, there is an implicit assumption that there is a ‘one’ and ‘another,’ two humanist individuals. Claudio and Marcelo’s is an activist, emancipatory, claim for collaborative writing, in all its excesses of intimacy, life, struggle, pain, and risk. For Claudio and Marcelo, just as for Lisa and Alecia, Jane, Elyse—indeed for all of the contributors—together is excess, a glut, a feast, a party—more than we can imagine.

*I am listening to Seasick Steve, singing about a party... I can't make the lyrics out
through his growling voice and the hard underpinning blues riff but I can tell at
least that he is expectant of a good time, and the Cotswold wheat beer that I've just
drunk leaves me feeling immersed.*



Gale et al. speak of the materiality of bodies writing in relation to each other; distant, separated, singular, their voices distinct and sometimes dissonant, writing apart but with each other. The “becoming” that they convey concerns how writing together in the academy might offer a place to bring forth the body, with its temporal physicality and its struggle against its limitations. We know now, in July 2012, over a year since this ‘group’—assemblage—first presented the earlier draft of their essay, that the hope that might have been contained in it was realised not in any glib, optimistic ‘resolution’ but in an indeterminate, incommensurable ‘ending’ of sorts, in another room at ICQI, with another audience, each of us reading to the question of what it meant to wonder whether this might be the last time we would share a performance space together (Gale et al., 2012b).

I have a sense of that hour and twenty minutes in May 2012 and of all those hours and twenty minutes over five years, our bodies arced towards each other in front of our audience. I pause to listen to the rain and the sound, from the television below, of Murray losing to Federer. Another noble British sporting failure. We do them so well.



We find in *After Writes* that the Bristol Collaborative Writing Group (BCWG) provides an eventful and forceful engagement with the Deleuzian theoretical conceptualisation of assemblage and a bringing together of an “agential realism” (Barad, 2007, p. 132). It is as if these writers set out to engage with the rhetoric of Barad when she poses the following questions:

What compels the belief that we have a direct access to cultural representations and their content that we lack toward the things represented? How did language come to be more trustworthy than matter? Why are language and culture granted their own agency and historicity, while matter is figured as passive and immutable and at best inherits a potential for change derivatively from language and culture? (p. 132)

From the outset and without making explicit articulations to and with Deleuze, the BCWG provides us with a living embodiment of possible entanglements of meaning and matter and how these are always becoming manifest in the various discursive/material assemblages that are apparent in their collaborative writings. Many of their original intentions become diffracted as they recognise and acknowledge the many starting points of their writings and how these were differentiated with each participant’s engagement with them. Setting out to explore notions of identity, collaboration and other terms that concerned them soon became differentiated as their embodied and collaborative practices also threw into intra-active contention such foundationalist representations as ‘writing’ and ‘group.’ They ask, with curiosity and a thinly-veiled critical eye “could (these terms) be appropriately claimed by us?” In using terms such as “counter-intuitive” and “risky endeavour” and by talking about a form of “collaboration that will materialise in our midst when new facets of our diversity find their way into transparency” their writing suggests intense moments of movement between matter and meaning through their expressed articulations between person and process.

In musing upon the collaborative energies, intensities and activating between the twos, threes, fours and so forth of this writing I found myself lost in the knowings and unknowing of the writers in the thresholds of this always unfolding writing. I found myself quietly laughing as I looked first for Jane, then Viv, then wondered if that was Laurinda, or was it Susan and then gave up! I realised the futility of these attempts at re/cognition and in this making real found a sensual pleasure in becoming lost in the multiplicities of their assemblage.



How do co-authors write together? On most occasions, as we noted in the introduction to this issue, this process is hidden and assumed to be innocent, even magical; we rarely know the stories that surround and imbue the text that we read. Lisa Mazzei and Alecia Jackson, who have co-authored and co-edited books and articles in the apparently straightforward first person plural voice, trouble their own production. In their “thresholds,” divisions collapse. Theirs is writing of refusal and resistance, their technology of writing a disavowal of the linearity of received wisdom and practice, a bid for ‘indecidability.’ Can we write, think, live into and through the threshold? Can we but do so, even as we erase it? Collaborative writing is—whether acknowledged or not—a practice of excess.

I wrote these lines a week ago and sent them to you. Lisa and Alecia write that their writing technology involves each entering in turn into a shared virtual space. As a car, muffled, eases past my first-floor room's double-glazed window, I wonder whether that practice creates space for a less differentiated ‘we’ than does ours. You have read the lines I have written and alongside the text is now your comment suggesting a different word to ‘indecidability’; you cite the notion of ‘undecideability’ which, in Derridean terminology, posits words and ideas as not being comprehensible solely on the basis of their opposites. I have folded you, your words, your thinking; perhaps also your affect, your percept, into this paragraph. Perhaps these words will stay; perhaps they will go. I sit here knowing we will work out what ‘we’ will settle on, as we have/do the uses of adverbs, exclamation points, and a host of other details. There is always a politics in play in collaboration.



In her paper Elyse Pineau both employs and critically engages with a form of performative autoethnography by bringing into focus *sous rature* some of its

methodological constituents and practices. Through the use of a neat sleight of expression she offers us a “hauntology” *qua* ontology as a means of engaging with the “analytic, compositional, and embodied” methodological practices of working in collaboration with the ghostly phenomena of the dead. She uses this approach to “further unsettle” those indeterminate subjectivities that might be generated through collaborative writing. In this account Elyse encourages us to always be diffractive regarding the collaborative (writing) practices with which we might be engaged. In sounding echoes with a similar encounter with the ‘spirit’ of Deleuze as an “ever present fifth collaborator” (Wyatt et al., 2010, p. 730), we encounter the ‘ghost’ of Anais Nin and others ‘haunting’ and actively embodying the language of this relational work. By proposing a new “hauntology” Elyse entices us to consider not only the human but the post-human forces and vectors of assemblage and in so doing persuades us to dishevel our established reflexivities and to consider and consider again the fluid relational intricacies and material, performative, intertextual possibilities of collaborative and collaborating space.

I end this sentence. Charged, haunted perhaps, with collaborative intensity I return to my book shelf; I find an old faded and battered copy of Nin's Delta of Venus (1990) partly hidden there and start to read. I let the afternoon slip by.



For Deleuze and Guattari (1988) the smallest unit is the assemblage, and we allow this thinking to inhabit the way in which we bring this special edition into nascent rhizomatic becoming. In applying their principle of cartography and decalomania to these writings we see this work “as not amenable to any structural or generative model,” with them we want this work to be “a stranger to any idea of a genetic axis or deep structure” (1988, p. 12). In working with the diverse and emergent forms of collaborative writing that are to be found in this edition, we challenge the Humean belief that the past provides us with rules for the future. We see this as working within and becoming constrained by the grooves and striations that have been provided by existing tracks and rails. And so, in many respects, we want this to be a mapping, we would like to think of it as “open and connectable in all of its dimensions” as “detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification” and would be delighted if it were “torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual or a group, or social formation” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988).

In a forthcoming chapter (Wyatt & Gale, 2013) we have worked to develop a post qualitative methodological approach which we have described as “assemblage/

ethnography.” This is an approach which involves a smoothing of existing humanist and phenomenological notions of autoethnographic practice and a suggesting of creative and diffractive possibilities to be found in the rhizomatic multiplicities emerging within and always there to fuel the pulses and fluid energies of the assemblage. In arguing with and around a “logic of sense” (Deleuze, 2004) we use this approach not only to map the shifting and flowing performance of the assemblage but to also always place under erasure the qualitative research practices of the lone autoethnographer.

In writing these words we realise the issues that surround the use and the conceptualisation of the unitary ‘we,’ a conceptualisation that is ever present in this concluding performance which will not conclude this special edition. So the *becoming-Ken-Jonathan* assemblage (Gale & Wyatt, 2009) that is problematically signified here as ‘we’ lives with an awareness of the intra-actions that function with and between assemblages in their multiple relation to one another. In this collection, therefore, ‘we’ wish to problematise and encourage an active engagement with the cliché that is the ‘we.’ As Malins argues, “representational clichés are extremely difficult to dismantle; it is not sufficient simply to cover them over or work around them” (2011, p. 171). So when Deleuze and Guattari assert that an “assemblage, in its multiplicity, necessarily acts on semiotic flows, material flows, and social flows simultaneously” (1988, p. 22), we find paralogic relations with the various collaborative writing practices that we have tentatively mapped and assembled here. In these writings we sense the effects and affect of discourse in its relational presence with the materiality of the body, we sense the opening up of a “field of play” (Richardson, 1997) in which the bodies and the languages of our co-collaborators are working to challenge the unhelpful separation that amputates the word from the hand that writes it. Again, with Deleuze and Guattari we hesitantly work towards our last full stop for the moment:

There is no longer a tripartite division between a field of reality (the world) and a field of representation (the book) and a field of subjectivity (the author). Rather an assemblage establishes connections between certain multiplicities drawn from each of these orders, so that a book has no sequel nor the world as its object nor one of several authors as its subject. (1988, p. 23)

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